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SUBJECT: The Khrushchev Purge



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BRIEFS ON INTERNATIONAL COMMUNISM

1957

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THE KHRUSHCHEV PURGE

23 July 1957

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THE KHRUSHCHEV PURGE
(23 July 1957)

1. In retrospect Khrushchev's action pattern since the death of Stalin is consistent in at least one respect, i. e. , his movement toward power. His consistency in terms of policy is less clear, perhaps because, in his movement toward power, he has used differences and conflicts over policy matters in such a way as to strengthen his own position. Nevertheless, his basic approach seems to stem from a desire to break with the obsolete methods of the Stalinist past and to strengthen the appeal of Communism both internally (as a ruling system) and externally (as a means of weakening, if not destroying, the enemy). His break with the past and his approach to the future are consistent with his movement toward power. The man who is to succeed a giant like Stalin could not aspire to this role if he were merely to copy Stalin. Such a man must emerge with a stature and ideas of his own. Khrushchev has shown that he is willing to take great risks in order to obtain such stature. The 20th CPSU Congress, his secret speech, his virgin lands program, his concept of decentralization--these are all steps involving considerable risks. Obviously, too, a man on his march to power would feel compelled to rationalize his gambling as being good for the USSR and World Communism. It may be assumed that Khrushchev similarly justified the June purge and probably received backing from the Central Committee on the same grounds. Thus, Khrushchev has propelled himself into a position where he has to show that he is good for the USSR and World Communism, and in so doing incurred the greatest risk in his career.

2. Khrushchev's struggle with his competitors in the Presidium appears to have gone rather well from the start. The Malenkov-Beria combine was broken in 1953. In 1954 Abakumov was executed for his role as purger in the "Leningrad affair." Early

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in 1955 Malenkov stepped down as Premier, and later in that year Molotov relinquished his post as Foreign Minister after having been castigated by a Plenum of the Central Committee in July. The 20th CPSU Congress (February 1956) castigated Molotov's and Malenkov's policies. In the second half of 1956 Kaganovich suffered demotion from his job as Chairman of the important Committee of Labor and Wages. However, the explosions in Poland and Hungary enabled Khrushchev's competitors to rally and to stage a comeback. Between November 1956 and early January 1957 Molotov and Malenkov re-emerged as influential. The December Plenum of the CC/CPSU which discussed highly controversial economic issues (downward revisions of the Sixth Five-Year Plan, managerial impediments and inefficiency) probably found Khrushchev at the lowest point of his recent career. However, from the February 1957 Plenum on, following a session of the Supreme Soviet which had accepted Khrushchev's industrial decentralization plan, Khrushchev rose to considerable strength backed by tremendous publicity and probably also by the majority of the regional Party apparatus which was loyal to him and found his decentralization plan profitable.

3. It has been pointed out that Khrushchev's competitors in the Presidium who were felled in June by the Khrushchev-packed Central Committee were not a homogeneous group. This is certainly true. The popular Malenkov was his chief competitor. Molotov and Kaganovich were "conservative" Stalinists and probably more inconvenient than threatening. Shepilov, a wartime associate of Khrushchev, probably was an opportunistic turncoat. Probably they all joined in opposition to Khrushchev on the question of industrial decentralization which they may have considered too dangerous a gamble. In turn they probably were joined or supported to various degrees by other Presidium members equally critical of Khrushchev's modus operandi. Bulganin at one time appears to have been associated with the "anti-Party group" but disassociated himself (possibly by

- 2 -

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"squealing") in time to win a temporary reprieve. Pervukhin and Saburov's actual connection with the group may have been based on a concurrence in views rather than factional activity. The exact line-up against Khrushchev in the Presidium sessions of 17, 18 and 19 June* may have been based on a loose alliance of oppositionist elements who may even have held, as Communist sources claim, a temporary majority. Although it will probably never be known exactly how the alliance coagulated, apparently the strategy of the opposition was to defeat Khrushchev on political grounds before he would eliminate the leaders of the opposition (Malenkov-Molotov-Kaganovich) because of their complicity in Stalin's crimes, particularly the "Leningrad affair".

4. In a CPSU document given to a Western CP leader for briefing purposes on 12 July reference is made to attempts made as early as January 1955 to oust Malenkov. These attempts are probably bound up with the de-Stalinization process and may have actually started when former Soviet Minister of State Security Abakumov was executed in December 1954 because of his role in the "Leningrad affair", i.e., the liquidation of high-ranking Soviet leaders** and associates of Zhdanov, Malenkov's chief competitor prior to his (possibly natural) death in 1948. Khrushchev cited the "Leningrad affair" in his "secret" speech of February 1956 as an illustration of Stalin's terror regime against the CPSU in the postwar period; he exculpated the majority of the Political

* Communist sources claim these three dates. It is likely that the crucial session took place on 19 June. On 17 and 18 June the majority of the Presidium appeared jointly in public at various social and ceremonial occasions.

** E.g., Politburo member and State planner Voznesensky, Secretary of the CC/CPSU Kuznetsov, et al.

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Bureau which did not know what Stalin was doing, and, conversely, he pointed his finger at those who did. Malenkov, Molotov and Kaganovich were members of the Politbureau at the time the "Leningrad affair" occurred. The implications could not have been lost on them in February 1956. Khrushchev used the method of indirect threat again in the 30 June 1956 Resolution of the CPSU which defined the limits of the de-Stalinization campaign, when he referred to a (presumably anti-Stalinist) "Leninist nucleus" which operated already during Stalin's lifetime. Implicitly, again, he pointed his finger at those leaders who had not been part of the "Leninist nucleus."

At that time, an evaluation of the secret Khrushchev speech noted:

"There is another theory which has been advanced. It is the theory that the secret speech by Khrushchev could be well interpreted as a blackmail instrument to be used against actual or potential opponents. This theory has acquired some weight in the light of the 30 June CPSU Resolution, which came out with the rather surprising statement that already during Stalin's lifetime a Leninist nucleus existed among the CC members and ranking Army officers--a nucleus which at various periods, for instance during the war years, curtailed the power of Stalin. From the reference to the existence of such a Leninist nucleus, it is possible to argue that the people outside of this Leninist nucleus are intended to be identified more distinctly with the Stalin era and, further, are singled out to be attacked or destroyed as traitors when the need arises. The theory, then, is that by having his speech accepted by the Central Committee, Khrushchev obtained a 'legal' basis for moving in on his actual or potential opposition and that, in having obtained this 'legal' basis, he has strengthened his power position. By the same token he has also alerted the

- 4 -

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'non-Leninists' to his intentions. Thus, the question arises of the relative strength of Khrushchev and of the opposition, as well as the question of the possibility that a power struggle in the CPSU leadership may break out. "

To this evaluation may be added good evidence of a later date which indicated that Khrushchev had not actually planned to make the speech but gave it because the delegates to the 20th CPSU Congress pressured for the details which had not been brought out in the open attacks on Stalin at the Congress. This evidence may be an indication that Khrushchev used his men in the Central Committee at the Congress in such a way that he would be "pressured" into forging his blackmail weapon, i.e., he let himself be induced into making the speech. Given the evidence of increasing and spreading opposition to Khrushchev's policies at the end of 1956 and beginning of 1957, it would be fair to assume that Khrushchev felt compelled to settle the score once and for all and to move from the employment of blackmail towards an actual showdown. The following statement in Victor Zorza's article of 11 July in the Manchester Guardian Weekly is extremely plausible.

"The opposition, and Malenkov in particular, had got wind of Khrushchev's intention to blame Malenkov, either implicitly or explicitly, for arranging the demotion and even the execution of Leningrad party leaders in 1948-9 and wanted the matter thrashed out in the Presidium. "

This item is plausible not only on general grounds but also by reason of other indications.

a. The announcement of the 250th Anniversary of the Founding of Leningrad was made on 24 April by Leningrad Pravda, So far as can be determined the 250th Anniversary

- 5 -

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actually took place in 1953. In view of Khrushchev's subsequent and emphatic allegations that the opposition were afraid to face the Leningraders, the timing of the Leningrad Celebration in April (when Khrushchev had already recouped his strength) appears ominous.

b. The official CPSU version of the June events emphasizes that the opposition used the pretext of discussing the speeches to be made at the Leningrad Anniversary in order to obtain an extraordinary Presidium session at which they then attacked the allegedly unsuspecting Khrushchev. In view of the fact that all parties concerned must have been fully cognizant of the implications of the Leningrad issue, it is highly improbable that the opposition used this pretext or that they should have made the matter of ceremonial speeches an urgent business. If the opposition had used this flimsy pretext, they certainly would have tipped their hand.

It is therefore submitted that Khrushchev maneuvered his opposition into a corner where they had only two alternatives, i.e., to cease their opposition or to force a showdown. Khrushchev's position was strong. He had the Central Committee on his side. He also had the "Leningrad affair" and, presumably, other affairs from the Stalin era which he could pin on the opposition. The opposition held the weaker position from the start. They were apparently in no position to use Khrushchev's complicity in Stalin's crimes. (It is presumed that Khrushchev controls the materials pertaining to this issue, to the exclusion of the opposition.) The opposition's choice to fight the battle on grounds of policy also is an indication of weakness. They could not have realistically expected to hold their ground against a Khrushchev-dominated Central Committee.

5. It is a matter of speculation why the opposition chose to fight for a lost cause. It is believed that there was a certain type of Communist psychology operating which has been directly or indirectly observed

- 6 -

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in lesser though somewhat parallel cases. It has often been asked why Communist leaders who had seen the handwriting on the wall did not take action in time to save themselves or to stave off approaching doom. Communist leaders often refuse to face such a situation and rationalize their attitude by saying, "They will not dare -- it will not happen to me." It may be that Malenkov and company, in the final analysis, similarly closed their eyes to the realities of a system which they had helped to perfect and in which a Khrushchev can ride to power by having his men shout down any opposition to his policies, by declaring his opponents criminals when it is politically opportune, or by a combination of these tactics.

6. It should be clear from the foregoing that the June events are the climax of an intramural struggle among the Soviet leadership in the course of which policy issues became tactical weapons but were not in themselves the roots of the struggle. It would appear, for example, that Malenkov was more concerned with the loss of his influence among the bureaucrats than with the principle of industrial decentralization.

This belief is confirmed by the initial and admittedly limited impressions gained of public reactions in the Soviet Union. Apathy, resignation, and cynicism were coupled with disapproval, shock, and sympathy for Molotov and particularly for Malenkov, who is still remembered for his consumer goods program. It is probable that the regime has suffered a further loss of prestige as a result of the spectacle of open warfare among the top chiefs. This may be precisely the reason why no retreat is possible for the Khrushchev regime, which must continue to justify the purge as being in the best interests of the people. On 21 July Pravda criticized a number of regional Soviet journals for not publicizing sufficiently the ouster of the Malenkov-Kaganovich-Molotov group.

"The meetings devoted to the plenum are over," Pravda said, "but that does not mean that our press should limit itself only to reports of those meetings."

- 7 -

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The militant task of our papers is to continue day in and day out to clarify the decisions of the June plenum, clearly and in popular form to tell of the immense victories of the Communist party and the Soviet people during the great forty years / since the Bolshevik Revolution /," (New York Times, 22 July 1957).

7. In the absence of a detailed study of the exact following that Khrushchev commands in the CPSU apparatus and, conversely, of those elements in the bureaucracy or the Party who may still sympathize with the ousted opposition, it is of course impossible to state whether Khrushchev's position is actually as strong as his victory in the June Plenum would indicate. Among the papers attacked by Pravda on 21 July (see above) were Party organs in the Ukraine and Bielorussia. This may indicate opposition in areas which should normally be safe for Khrushchev. The best available estimates on Khrushchev's strength within the CPSU apparatus indicate a loyal following of roughly 60% of the total. If this estimate is correct, Khrushchev must reckon with some continued opposition within the Party and further purges on lower echelons will probably take place.

8. Much speculation has been aired concerning the role of Zhukov and the Soviet Army. One school of thought holds that Khrushchev rules with the help of, and possibly under pressure from, the Army, which now holds a position similar to that of the Reichswehr in pre-World War II Germany. Another school maintains that Zhukov has no political aspirations and that the Soviet Army will be satisfied with the recognition of its requirements concerning the security of the USSR. Still another school holds that it would be an oversimplification to consider the Soviet Army a monolithic unit since it contains both elements with political aspirations as well as non-political elements. This latter view probably comes closer to the truth. There is no doubt that Zhukov is backing Khrushchev to a point of glorification. Nevertheless the 30 June 1956 CPSU

- 8 -

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Resolution (see above) stressed the fact that the so-called Leninist nucleus was composed of Party as well as military leaders, and it would be reasonable to assume that Khrushchev in June 1956 had already threatened by implication certain opposition elements in the Soviet Army. With Bulganin's downfall reportedly imminent, it should be interesting to watch for shifts in the Army command. Although one should think that Khrushchev would not risk endangering Army efficiency through excessive purges, his view of the Soviet Army--as implied in certain remarks of his during his London visit--is a traditional Bolshevik one, i.e., that the Army is an instrument of the Party. Given his precariously balanced position between the needs of the consumers (which he promises to satisfy) and Army requirements on heavy industry, Khrushchev may yet be forced by circumstance into an Army purge, if and when the Soviet military press too hard for their objectives.

It should be remembered that Khrushchev until now has used the de-Stalinization issue largely as it pertained to crimes committed by Stalin against the Party. (Thus he brought the Malenkov group to its knees.) He has not used as yet the issue of the crimes committed by Stalin against the Army, i.e., the pre-World War II executions of Soviet military leaders such as Marshal Tukhachevsky, et al. It may be speculated that he holds the issue in reserve in order to turn it against opposition or recalcitrant Army elements. After all, Stalin in the postwar period, as a qualified observer noted, surrounded himself with his Marshals as "symbols of authoritarian power," and guilt by such association could be established. Conversely, opposition elements in the Army, should they desire to move in on the CPSU, could well turn the issue against Khrushchev, Mikoyan, and Shvernik who, reportedly, supported Stalin and his purger, Yezhov, in 1937-38 when thousands of Red Army officers were liquidated.

The crux of the matter lies in Khrushchev's ability to balance out requirements of the domestic economy and Soviet Army requirements. This is not an easy balancing act.

- 9 -

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9. On the whole, Khrushchev's position is not as firm as it may appear. His acts following the June Plenum indicate that his main concern now is with the consolidation of his position and the build-up of personal support in order to strengthen his position.

a. The trip to Czechoslovakia seems to have had no other purpose than to impress his home audience with the support he received personally.

b. The unprecedented advance briefings of Free World CP leaders prior to the July 3 CPSU communique were apparently made in order to ensure rapid CP expressions of support for the purge.

c. The pattern of the purges of "liberals" and pro-Titoists in Rumania and Bulgaria has been--rather shrewdly--analyzed as "more a matter of personnel than of policy" and it has been pointed out that "the leaders /in the Satellites/ on whom Khrushchev believes he can count may be shielded regardless of their affinity for Stalinist ideas and their tough unyielding attitudes toward domestic problems." (See Flora Lewis' excellent piece "Khrushchev Reshapes Policy on Satellites", New York Times, Section 4, page 4, 21 July 1956.)

d. There are also indications that the Khrushchev regime desires some gesture of support from the West. It would be fair to conclude that the regime could turn such gestures into propagandistic-political capital.

It should also be considered that in the fluid post-Stalin atmosphere in the USSR a "purge" may not take its course as envisaged. A strong indicator in this respect will be the fate of Bulganin who has been reliably reported on his way out. If he should prove to be stable, a strengthening of Khrushchev's opposition could be assumed.

- 10 -

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10. Khrushchev has not yet acquired sufficient strength to launch new experiments with his "peaceful coexistence" tactic. Although he has portrayed his "victory" as the triumph of the policy enunciated at the 20th CPSU Congress, he is making clear that he is against excessive liberalization ("revisionism") as well as obsolete Stalinist methods ("dogmatism"). He still draws a firm ideological demarcation line against Titoism, and has stated that Soviet foreign policy cannot be expected to change. Internally he is re-emphasizing the priority of heavy industry. Externally he is again advocating the united front with "progressive" parties. In brief, his positions, for the moment, are reaffirmations of the Khrushchev line which has been observable since 1955.

11. During Khrushchev's consolidation period the Soviets will continue to react sensitively to Free World comments on the purge. In the period from 5-17 July the Soviet press and radio reacted angrily to the following themes which appeared in the West,

- a. Purge indicates internal discord.
- b. June Plenum decisions indicate weakness of the regime; are manifestation of crisis in leadership and must lead to the weakening of the unity of the Socialist camp.
- c. Soviet system is undergoing stresses and strains; weakness and crisis of the Soviet system.
- d. Purge was characteristic of Soviet system; the CC/CPSU is an arena for a struggle for power.
- e. USSR is a dictatorship run by a handful of people.
- f. Exposure and removal of the anti-Party group was the work of one man.
- g. Doubt that democratic procedures were employed in the treatment of the anti-Party group.

- 11 -

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h. Malenkov challenged Khrushchev's dictatorship.

i. The average Soviet citizen had no intimation of developments, was not told the truth.

j. Suggestions that a change in Soviet foreign policy can be expected; conclusions that the Soviet Union will make concessions to the West; suggestions that the USSR is seeking to increase its influence in Asia by sensational measures and that USSR is trying to alienate Japan from the West; suggestions that the Arabs are concerned about Shepilov's removal; Soviet policy is not connected with Shepilov personally.

k. Czechoslovakia Party leaders are bitter enemies of Khrushchev; suggestions that the trip to Czechoslovakia would result in a purge there.

l. The Soviets were particularly enraged about the treatment given the purge in the Danish press. Some of the Danish press reactions were:

(1). Skepticism that anything good will come of the upheaval.

(2). The present regime will continue to pursue the objectives it had in common with Molotov and company, and with Stalin.

(3). Skepticism on how Khrushchev would be able to reconcile the policy of "torpedoing capitalism" with "peaceful coexistence".

(4). Possibility of new explosions in the Kremlin.

(5). Sympathy for the once free Czech people but not for Czech leaders who may be on their way out.

(6). Grateful appreciation of NATO which protects free people from developments such as occur in the East.

- 12 -

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